

Kinship Care

The Kinship Foster Care Program provides the same support to relative caregivers who are serving as foster parents to children in state custody as is provided to non-related foster parents. This support allows for case management, referrals for service, respite care, child care, access to flexible funding, negotiated board rates based on special circumstances or needs of the children, and other services to be made available to these caregivers and the children placed in their care. Through kinship foster care, children are placed with relatives who are able to provide a safe, nurturing home for them, and are often able to remain with their siblings.

When children are in the legal custody of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services and placed with relative caregivers, these caregivers have the same approval standards and training requirements to become foster parents as unrelated caregivers. Kinship foster care policies have been revised over the past year to facilitate placement and to more effectively preserve and respect families. Policy has been modified out of a recognition that emergency situations arise where the best interest of the child may be served by placing the child in the home of a relative caregiver quickly, and by being able to approve that home for needed support in a timely manner.

Long-term relative placement is an option for children who are placed with an appropriate relative who is willing and able to assume long-term responsibility for the child but has legitimate concerns about adoption. In such

cases, DCS and the kinship foster home sign a long-term placement agreement to ensure the stability and permanency of the placement.

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) data indicates that of the 4,484 children in foster homes on June 30, 2002, 503 were in relative foster homes. That is an increase from the 343 children in relative homes in the previous year.

"Jamal's" mother could no longer care for him or his three sisters, and without the aid of extended family the children would have to go to a foster home. Jamal and his sisters had an aunt and uncle who wanted to help, but were financially unable to care for four more children in addition to the two children they had of their own. Upon learning about the family's desire to care for the children, the case manager approached the aunt and uncle with information about the Kinship Care program. The family was relieved to hear that there was a way for them to provide the care that their nieces and nephew so badly needed. They eagerly began the process to become eligible for the program and completed PATH training as quickly as possible. Through the dedication of their relatives and the financial assistance and support of the Kinship Care program, Jamal and his sisters were able to live with their aunt and uncle.

Relative Caregiver Program

In June 2000, the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation allowing for the development of the Relative Caregiver Program. Four million dollars was allocated to support this two-year pilot program funded through the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. The Tennessee Department of Human Services is the state's recipient of TANF funds and is partnering with DCS in the development of the Relative Caregiver Program. The Department of Children's Services administers this public/private collaboration designed to support children who are not able to be raised by their parents, and who are being cared for by grandparents or other family members as an alternative to coming into DCS custody.

The Relative Caregiver Program seeks to strengthen a caregiver's ability to maintain a supportive and stable environment for children through respecting what is unique and special within each family; provide accurate, easy-to-follow information about existing resources available to families; fill gaps where services are not available; and provide financial aid. Services provided to caregivers include individual and family counseling, legal services, financial aid, recreation, homemaker services, support group participation, training, and case management, as well as providing for concrete needs such as beds, mattresses and clothing. Services provided to children include children's therapeutic groups, training, and recreation. Funds are disseminated on an as-needed basis, can be offered up to four times in one year, and are in addition to the